

## GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT IN SPORT FOR ALL, ELITE SPORT AND IT RELATION TO LEISURE POLICY

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### Abstract

*The 'sport' in Sport for All is loose term for such disparate activities as informal recreation, leisure pursuits, play, health promotion activities as well as formal organised sport. Elite sport refers to power and performance sport and includes all those that are highly organised and competitive. Neither Sport for All, nor elite sport, is the substitute for a nation public leisure policy. Governments may have grounded their policies in very different legitimations, which may generate subtle yet telling differences in policy implementation. Leisure policy should not be on the number of gold medals our competitors can win, but rather on the inspiration and impetus their success gives to the citizens of our nation for mass participation in physical activity in all age groups and at all levels of ability.*

**Keywords:** Government and sport; Sport for All; Elite sport; Leisure policy

The purpose of this paper is to take a critical look at the sport for all and elite sport and its relation to leisure policy. What values underlining sport for all and elite sport? Are Sport for All and elite sport incompatible aims of a government leisure policy? What kinds of governments are involved in each approach? The big picture of this paper is have a critical look the whole spectrum of sport, recreation and leisure in several government's leisure policy.

**Sport for all:** As Coghlan (1990, p.117) notes:

Sport for All was defined (by the Council of Europe in 1976) as something quite different from the original concept of sport, embracing not only sport proper but also, and perhaps above all various forms of physical activity from spontaneous unorganised games to the minimum of physical exercise regularly performed. The 'sport' in Sport for All is loose term for such disparate activities as informal recreation, leisure pursuits, play, health promotion activities as well as formal organised sport. According to Cousineau (1998, p.32), "the major aims of Sport for All ideology are, firstly, to democratise sport participation and, secondly, to improve the health of citizens".

The Sport for All missions is to ensure that every citizen has an equal opportunity to engage in a chosen sport, regardless of age or skill level.

**Elite sport:** Elite sport refers to power and performance sport and includes all those that are highly organised and competitive. In most traditional definitions, sport is regarded as physical activity that is competitive, requires skill and exertion, and is governed by institutionalised rules. Coakley (1998, p.19) provides a good example of such definitions and suggests that in many cultures today, sport can be defined as:

... institutionalised competitive activity that involves vigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex physical skills by individual whose participation is motivated by a combination of personal enjoyment and external rewards.

In the elite sport context, the definition of sport is often confined to select competitive

sports, to sports governed by rules and schedules requiring sophisticated and expensive facilities and equipment, to the acquisition of skill, to the need for trained coaches and to team participation. Values of winning, as a major reward, dominate. Moreover, attention is directed largely towards youth.

Elite sport is often considered to be an important element for promoting mass participation. Its proponents maintain that elite sport, such as the Olympic Games, motivate more people to engage in sport and physical activities. People are said to be inspired by the achievement of the athletes and motivated to follow in their footsteps. (Arnaudon, 1995). In fact, elite sport has its place in any society and elite sport programmes deserve some support. The benefits to the national spirit and glory of the country, as well as the contribution to its economy and political pride, well justify the efforts to maintain such programmes. However, it is important to recognise that elite sports have never been, nor will they ever be, 'for all'. They will be for a very few (Cousineau, 1998).

**Leisure policy:** The *Charter for Leisure* drawn up by the World Leisure and Recreation Association in 1970 and revised in 1981, declares, in Article 1:

Leisure is basic human right. This implies the obligation of governments to recognise and protect this right and of citizens to respect the right of fellow citizens to leisure. This means that no one shall be deprived of this right for reasons of colour, creed, sex, religion, race, handicap or economic condition.

Leisure policy is associated with policies for free time, for passive or active recreations (in sport, the arts, popular culture or informal recreation), with policies aimed at compensating for the alienation of work (or of unemployment), or at fostering personal fulfilment through non-work activities (Henry, 1993). Leisure policy views other non-sport forms of leisure activities as being of equal importance as a means of individual and community development. The leisure and recreation field recognises the importance of physical activities in the lives of everyone and the benefits of sports participation for some, but it does not limit itself to sport as a vehicle to deliver leisure opportunities and services.

### **Are Sport for All and Elite sport incompatible aims of a government leisure policy?**

Neither Sport for All, nor elite sport, is the substitute for a nation public leisure policy. It should be noted that the field of leisure and recreation has not been in the forefront of the sport movement. Leisure policy writers and recreation professionals promote 'recreation for all' and see sport as only one of the sectors in the field of leisure and recreation (Cousineau, 1998).

Sport for All is essentially a philosophy, a message to motivate citizens to engage in sport and other physical activities. It is also a message to policy-makers encouraging them to use their positions to advance the cause and provide the necessary opportunities for participation. However, the approaches used by the Sport for All community to motivate participation in sport and physical activities are often ineffective (Beran & Semotiuk, 1991). There is equally no supporting evidence that mass-media campaigns increase participation. At best they increase awareness (Cousineau, 1998). If Sport for All is to reach the masses, it must be equally attentive to non-competitive and unstructured physical activities. If it wishes to remain true to its ideology, it must concentrate its efforts on creating equal opportunities to engage in physical activities for people of all ages, all levels of skill, and both sexes.

Although elite sport has become the 'standard' for determining what sports should be

in many countries, it has not been accepted by everyone (Coakley, 1998). It is undeniable that Elite sport is often considered to be an important element for promoting mass participation and that cores of elite athletes help express national identity and pride. But, in the perspective of leisure policy, sport activity must be for the masses, for 'all', not for a 'few'. More important for an elite sport model to become dominant, is a wider expectation that life should involve competition, that rewards should go to winners, that winners deserve power and wealth, and that ranking people on the basis of power and wealth is not only fair, but 'natural'.

### **What kinds of governments are involved in Sport for All / Elite sport approach?**

Though the government focus on sports is relatively new, it in no way implies that local, national or international concern with sports is new (cf. Dunning, 1993). Indeed, the various structures initially developed to provide and administer sports at each level were non-governmental in nature. As governments came to be involved with those systems, they had to accommodate them and, sometimes, transform them. Governments may have grounded their policies in very different legitimations, which may generate subtle yet telling differences in policy implementation. For example, Canada's concerns for nation building generated a focus on Olympic sports and the development of elite competitors (Chalip, 1996). On the other hand, several European governments have sought to promote health through the physical activity that sports generate. They have therefore applied substantial resources to the promotion of Sport for All programmes rather than to the development of programmes to select and train a few elite competitors.

In the United Kingdom (UK), a number of factors affect the government's sport policy. First, the definition of sport and recreation as an element of the welfare state which, in the 1980s, was moderated by the Conservative Party's antipathy to both public expenditure and local government. Second there is the tension, particularly evident in Conservative ideology, between treating sport as an aspect of 'free time', which should therefore result in minimal intervention by government, and the desire for international prestige. The outcome of this mixed motive is a position in the mid- 1990s (Houlihan, 1996) where sport is funded through a combination of direct public subsidy and state-supported, but essentially commercial, sponsorship schemes.

During the late 1980s, a Prime Minister who held an open contempt for sports led the UK government. Margaret Thatcher saw sports more as a source of problem (soccer hooliganism in particular) than a source of policy opportunities. On the other hand, the election of John Major in December 1990 as Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative Party, marked a dramatic change in fortunes for sport policy. At the domestic level, two policy objectives have dominated in recent years: first, the promotion of mass participation in sports (Sport for All); and second, sports as a means of regulating the behaviour of the young (Houlihan, 1996). The prime responsibility for implementation rests with local government and the Sport Councils, both of which have had to work within the highly restrictive ideological framework of right-wing Conservatism.

As the UK economy emerges slowly from the recession of the early 1990s, there is unlikely to be any return to the levels of public investment seen a decade or two earlier. While the national lottery will inject more money into sports, it remains to be seen what proportion of the fund is directed to expanding participation (Houlihan, 1996). The best prospects for achieving the goal of 'Sport for All' will lie in encouraging closer co-operation between clubs, governing bodies, and local authorities and pursuing an expansion of community use of facilities.

Many countries have adopted the blueprint of the Sport for All ideology but some have been decidedly hesitant. Canada is one of those, which bought into the general concept but not the specific wording. The message 'for all' sent by the Europeans, at that time, did not have the same impact in Canada as it had in other countries (Cousineau, 1998). In the 1970s, Canada was already embarked in the programme for the democratisation of leisure opportunities, including sports. Democratisation of leisure and recreation was accomplished through decentralising service provision. Municipal governments, along with local volunteer organisations, were officially granted the key responsibilities in the delivery of recreation for all. Sport, in this context, was included as one of the recreation sectors to be provided. 'Serious' elite sports competition were the domain of higher government levels along with provincial and national sport-governing bodies.

In New Zealand, sport for everybody is valued as a primary human right and a contribution to fun in life (Palm, 1991). After a nation wide survey the Hillary- Commission for Sport, Fitness and Leisure among others, runs a programme of modified sport activities called "KiwiSport" which is addressed to 9 to 12 year old boys and girls. Fitting into the tradition of this country outdoor sports like swimming, hiking and cycling have ongoing increased. For example, in 1996, there are 2.1 million people, 78% of all New Zealand adults, take part in sporting activities (Hillary Commission, 1996). The Hillary Commission, which was established in 1987, monitored the needs of the people in at every level from the casual to the elite sport in New Zealand.

The Hillary Commission is the public funding agency that encourages all New Zealanders to participate and achieve in sport, fitness and active living. The principal objectives of the Hillary Commission are to: Develop and encourage recreation and sport; make recreation and sport accessible and appealing to all New Zealanders irrespective of age, ability or sex; enhance the mental and physical well-being of the nation by encouraging more healthy and active lifestyles (Hillary Commission Report, 1988, p5).

Like Canada, New Zealand took both Sport for All and elite sport approaches into account in their sport development. The Commission's Chairman (1988), Sir Ronald Scott stated:

The Commission sees two priorities for sport in New Zealand. The first is the development of a Sport for All policy designed to boost participation and involvement in sporting pursuit, particularly by the less active segments of the population. The second priority is to make excellence possible at all levels. In the context of Sport for All, participation has been promoted through various campaigns including "Come Alive", "Get a Family Feeling", "Have a Go", "Moving Nation" and the latest, "Push Play". "Push Play" is a nation-wide campaign to get all New Zealanders enjoying physical activity as part of their everyday lives (Hillary Commission, 1999). In the context of Elite sport, increasingly, New Zealand sports administration and sport policy at the national level aims to produce athletes who will be capable of winning 'gold' for their sport and their country (Hindson & Gidlow, 1994). Governments/ states generally have strong vested interests in maintaining the idea that success is based on discipline, loyalty, determination, and the ability to keep working in the face of hardship and bad times. Sports, especially world-class and elite sports, have been used in many nations to promote these values and foster particular interpretations of how social life does and should work. For example, this was a major motive underlying the sponsorship of elite sports in the former Soviet Union. The Soviet government also used sports to emphasise the importance of teamwork, common aims and interests, collectivism, comradeship, hard work and responsibility for the common cause (Coakley, 1998). These were the values that the government connected with Soviet sport, and the hope was that people would adopt them in their lives as Soviet Citizens.

Communist sports policy in Soviet Union, as well as in Eastern Europe, is defunct. It lives on in China, Cuba, and North Korea. Sport, or rather physical culture, has had particular social and political significance in the development of communist societies. Sport retained its importance in communist society because it has been more central in their social systems and has been controlled and directed by the state. The sport system grew up with and was integral to the building of a strong nationstate which generated its own motivational forces and patriotism (Riordan, 1996).

Communist sport, as in China, was oriented toward Olympic success and fitness for the masses. They have different goals in different labels for sporting activities: 'sport' (*yundong*) refers to elite/competitive sports and 'physical culture' (*tiyu*) refers to sports and fitness for the masses (Sport for All). The most important guiding principles for its domestic policy are that physical culture should strengthen the people's physiques, enrich social and cultural life, and serve socialism (Xiangjun & Brownell, 1996). Domestic and foreign policy goals are regarded as complementary. Elite athletes should serve the causes of the overall 'improvement' (*tigao*) of performance levels and of friendship between nations. 'Improvement' at the top levels of sport is to be combined with the 'popularisation' (*puji*) of sport for the masses, the main goal of which is to produce productive, healthy and happy workers.

The federal government of Australia has approached the development of sport through the adoption of a model that involves the elements of elite sport and mass participation in a hierarchical structure, promoting the idea that the 'larger the base, the higher the peak' (Famer & Arnaudon, 1996). Today, sport in Australia is being supported at all levels of government. At the local level, the priority is the construction and maintenance of recreational and sporting facilities. State and territory authorities have focused on participation efforts, which include facility enhancement and athlete and coach development, while still developing their elite

athletes and academies. At the federal level, some financial assistance has been available for the development of community sporting facilities. Federal sport policy has had two major objectives: to promote and encourage community participation in sports and to significantly improve Australia's sporting performance at the elite level (cf. Famer & Arnaudon, 1996).

In nations with fully market economies, such as the United State, sports are often associated with success and hard work so instead of references to collectivism and the common good, there are references to competition and individual achievement. Instead of an emphasis on comradeship, stories emphasise how individuals have reached personal goals and experienced self-fulfilment through sports (Coakley, 1998, p.410). An emphasis on competition, personal achievement and individual fulfilment pervades the media coverage of sports in nations with market economies. Despite the importance of sports to Americans, there has never been a demand for institutionalised, direct, government participation in the world of sport. There is no federal agency responsible for professional or amateur sports and no specific subsidy to the industry. The nation's values and beliefs dictate that federal policy towards sport be fragmented and indirect. Sport is viewed as a tool to achieve other objectives, be it improved health, lower crime, national pride, community identity, or ideological advancement (Chalip & Johnson, 1996).

All the governments in my review take both forms of sport into account in their sport policy. However, in the 1990s some of them, including Australia, Canada, United State and the United Kingdom gave more emphasis to Elite Sport. McDonald (1998, p. 74) stated:

For the UK government, the philosophy and aims of Sport for All are not a priority....

These are laudable aims, but secondary to the pursuit of high standards of sporting achievement.

## CONCLUSION

This paper had taken a critical look at the sport for all and elite sport, and its relation to leisure policy. It presented the values underpinning both forms of sports. Then, it examined whether sport for all and elite sport are incompatible aims of a government leisure policy. The literature showed that most governments are involved in both sport for all and elite sport. In the whole spectrum of sport, recreation and leisure, there is certainly a place for the Olympic-level athlete and strong encouragement should be given at the national level to our athletes, since great international understanding can be reached on the sporting field. However, the focus should not be on the number of gold medals our competitors can win, but rather on the inspiration and impetus their success gives to the citizens of our nation for mass participation in physical activity in all age groups and at all levels of ability.

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